

## January 21, 2010 - Murtha: Healthcare Debate Changes

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Murtha: Healthcare debate changes

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The Republican Party's victory in the Massachusetts election for a U.S. Senate seat changed the "tenor" of the debate over healthcare legislation in Washington, D.C., U.S. Rep. John P. Murtha said Wednesday.

Republican state legislator Scott Brown defeated Democratic state attorney general Martha Coakley to win the seat of the late Democratic Sen. Edward M. Kennedy on Tuesday.

Brown's addition will push Republican membership in the Senate to 41, which is enough to block or delay votes through filibusters. During a telephone town hall meeting Wednesday, Murtha, D-Johnstown, called the results of the Massachusetts race a setback and it would "change the dynamic" of health-care reform.

The Senate and House of Representatives passed different versions of healthcare reform legislation and are in the midst of merging the two bills into one that President Barack Obama would sign.

Murtha said he believes bipartisan support still exists for reducing prescription medication costs and helping more people obtain insurance, but health-care reforms probably would be done in piecemeal. The outcome of the Massachusetts election "changed the whole tenor of health care," Murtha said before he began accepting questions from area residents during the telephone conference.

He said voters sent a message telling Congress to change the course of the healthcare debate. A woman from Waynesburg called and said she receives Social Security and Medicare benefits, but she pays more than \$500 a month on health insurance and that consumes half of her Social Security.

"How do they think we're supposed to live?" she asked. Murtha said people with pre-existing medical conditions can't get insurance and Congress will continue working on healthcare reform "even if it is piecemeal."

A retiree from Apollo said he receives some medication through the Veterans Administration and his wife recently retired with hospitalization insurance. He said they pay \$183 a month for health insurance, in addition to their Medicare costs. He said the co-payment for one of his prescriptions is \$80 and he is worried that health-care legislation would increase those costs.

Obama is making the same mistake former President Bill Clinton made in trying to reform health care: "He tried to do too much," Murtha said.

Murtha said he voted against former President George W. Bush's health-care initiatives because they didn't allow for competition in the health-care industry. "We're committed to do something about health care. We're trying to work something out," Murtha said.

A woman from Finleyville said her husband's prescription for

the cholesterol medication rose to \$90 a month from \$33 a month one year ago. One reason for that, Murtha said, is because there is not enough competition among prescription drug makers.

"We need to reform health care because people can't afford it" even if change comes piecemeal, Murtha said.

A man from Rices Landing asked Murtha to propose legislation allowing people who retire at age 62 to receive Medicare. He said his wife wants to retire, but her only option is to pay for expensive Cobra coverage until she would qualify for Medicare. Murtha said he would consider the suggestion, but the cost would be an issue.

A Washington woman said money the country spends in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan should be spent on health care instead. "We're creating more enemies (in those countries). We're not winning anyone's hearts and minds. Spend the money here," she said. Murtha said there was no reason to invade Iraq, but al-Qaeda is a worldwide threat. Sending more U.S. combat troops to Afghanistan is a mistake, he said, adding that troops should be used to recruit and train Afghanistan security forces.

Competition is the key to lowering health-care costs, he said. A Hopwood man said that because Republicans would oppose any health-care reforms, Congress should instead focus its attention on the economy. He said too many people are out of work and the economy is more important than health care.

Murtha said creating jobs always has been a priority for him. He said Congress would continue to work on healthcare reform and job creation. He said 21 million jobs were created during the Clinton administration and taxes paid by employees created a surplus in the federal budget.

A woman from Johnstown said the United States is concentrating troops in Afghanistan, but terrorism is a worldwide problem. Murtha said the United States can't win a guerilla war in Afghanistan, noting that

Russia lost a war in Afghanistan. He said the U.S. sent 500,000 troops Vietnam, but the war was lost because the people didn't support the U.S. effort. He said Congress would set goals for the military effort in Afghanistan.